

## Herbie and TTouch: Using TTouch to help rehabilitate a pony from long term box rest and laminitis

I first heard about Herbie through [The Laminitis Site](#) (TLS), a charitable organization helping horses susceptible to laminitis mainly through education. TLS felt that Herbie would benefit from some bodywork since they felt she should be making more progress. During my training to become a **TTEAM practitioner**, I worked on a horse with laminitis with some dramatic improvements, so I was keen to see another case to confirm my previous experience of helping a horse with this condition. So I organized my first visit to Herbie as soon as possible to see what I could do to help.

### 09/08 Visit 1 Initial assessment

We went straight to Herbie's barn when I arrived and I saw the little bay pony for the first time in her barn area. Gradually the barn filled up with people, me and the owner, a friend of hers who was visiting on holiday, a neighbour and her daughter and some family members appeared during the session as well. Herbie's owner gave me an overview of Herbie's situation; she seemed tense and not very positive about Herbie's prospects. Her work with TLS had helped her to understand why Herbie has had problems for so long and start to address the cause of the problem but Herbie's problems had been long standing. Herbie had been on box rest for almost three months. She recently started a treatment for PPID and had an initial realigning trim. Herbie herself was eating hay hanging from a haynet and studiously appearing to ignore us completely.

My initial **visual observations** were: Cresty neck, fat pads, dipped back, ribs visible, shiny coat, hollow chest area, disconnected look to her body – the front end and hind end didn't seem to go together, pointing left front foot (the one with the most bone loss on the x-rays), unhappy face with a tight chin, focused eating of haynet. Over all I thought she looked better than I had expected and her feet looked fairly normal.



After taking some photos and notes I started my **flat hand observations**, using my hand as my eyes to feel temperature changes, coat changes and areas of tension.

Herbie had a whirl on the left side of her neck, just behind this was a very “cordy” area which was also warm and tight, there were loud cracking noises from her shoulder area when she shifted her position. When Herbie felt pressure on her head collar she immediately opposed it, there was a stronger reaction on the left side. She felt hard and tight along her back. Her tail hung straight and was loose. It was when I started to feel down her legs, that I found what for me was the most concerning issue, I wrote down in capital letters on my notes “FREEZING FEET”. You can expect that a horse on box rest is going to have reduced circulation since movement helps to stimulate circulation; if you have a horse stabled overnight you may often find that their feet feel cooler in the morning, however this wasn’t just cooler – it was freezing. Herbie had quite a few cold spots, her nose was cold, her hind quarters had cold spots and her legs were cold from the knee and stifle downwards. (On a hot summer day in SW France, these cold areas were particularly remarkable). When touching her right hind leg, Herbie was very defensive, she moved towards me and gave a kick warning. (In subsequent visits she used this avoidance technique of moving into me several times, I suspect she thought it was a good option for her since it required less movement than moving out of reach).

Her owner had reported difficulty picking out her feet and during the farrier visit. She also reported that Herbie’s feet weren’t growing much at all. Issues with her legs having been identified, picking up her feet was not my priority at this stage, though it was noted as issue to be addressed later.

At this point I reported my findings to her owner, I was conscious of the audience and feeling a bit of pressure to “do something”, and so we conspired to take the audience off for a cup of tea while I had some one-to-one time with Herbie.

My focus was on Herbie’s cold areas, I wanted to improve circulation to her limbs since growing a new hoof capsule was going to be impossible if the feet weren’t growing. **Python Lifts** were the first thing I thought of, this is an easy Ttouch to demonstrate and to learn, it can bring dramatic improvements in circulation. In a **Python Lift** you use both hands encircling the leg with a very light pressure; you gently lift the skin with both hands, wait a moment at the top and then support the skin down again. I concentrated on the front legs to start with. The hind legs were more complicated because Herbie did not want me to touch the right leg so I only did the touches at the top of the leg; in this situation you work within the horses comfort zone, with time this will get larger.



Since picking up Herbie’s feet wasn’t a real option at this point I used **Pelvic Circles** and **Wither Circles** to provide a gentle movement to Herbie’s body and joints, often while doing **Pelvic Circles** I will hear lots of belly noises and Herbie was no different.

When our “audience” returned from tea, I was able to demonstrate **Python lifts** with the owner and her friend who was going to be spending some time with Herbie. I did the lifts on one of her owner’s legs and then got them to practice on each other and say how it felt compared to the other leg, responses included “lighter” and “warmer” – so they could understand how **Python Lifts** might help Herbie’s cold limbs. We spent some time with me alternating doing a little body work with Herbie and explaining what I had been doing to give Herbie little breaks. These breaks are essential to allow the

animal to process what they might be feeling in their body. By the end of the session I could feel some warmth in her front feet, but little change in the temperature of the hind feet.

After a long session at Herbie's home, leaving her owner equipped with two TTouches as homework I left my first visit feeling drained. I said immediately that I wanted to see Herbie again fairly soon and I hoped that there would be some noticeable changes, especially an improvement in the circulation in her feet, however since her problems were long term, instant dramatic improvements seemed unlikely to me. In fact I was a bit worried about how she would cope with "feeling" in her feet which may come from an improvement of circulation; if this was painful I theorized that she may get even more reluctant to move.

## 22/08 Visit 2 Follow up Bodywork

I arrived slightly more optimistic than when I left last time due to an email from her owner to say that she felt the TTouches were definitely helping to warm up Herbie's cold spots; though there was a caveat to say that Herbie had been irritable for three days and not wanting to be touched. With no other information I waited to see what I would find, later her owner remembered that Herbie had a vaccination three days before...

Immediately I checked her legs for warmth and the front ones were warmish, the hind feet were still very cold. Her visible stance appeared to have changed; Herbie was now favouring the right front leg instead of the left, though in a less extreme fashion. She showed some reactions in her face when I was touching the knee area of this leg but there were no other clues to be seen as to why she was favouring the leg. During this session I repeated some of the bodywork I had done last time and ran through several other touches as part of an exploration of Herbie's body. For example using a **Rib Release** I found that to one side Herbie immediately provided opposition to the movement, so instead of releasing her ribs she tensed them up, this provided me with some information about her body to guide me where to work.

Today Herbie parked herself by the exit to the field, at one point I wanted a little more space to work so I asked her to move using a **signal on the head collar**, she used her head defensively and showed a lot of resistance to any pressure. At this point I started thinking about doing a TTEAM groundwork exercise called **Dingo**, to teach a more constructive response to a signal on the halter. While we were not in the position to do groundwork - Herbie barely moved in her barn during my first two visits - we were working towards getting her out of her barn and moving again, so I noted this for a future exercise.

With Herbie still confined to quarters, an inability to pick up her feet sensibly and more progress necessary on the circulation in her hind legs – especially the right one - there was lots more work to be done, however Herbie showed lots of very positive signs during her bodywork session today, including yawning, chewing and passing gas. Notably she was politely communicating her negative feedback showing me that she recognised we were listening to her and didn't feel the need to shout. The atmosphere was different from two weeks before, her owner seemed to see some light at the end of the tunnel and Herbie herself showed signs of interacting with the process, a big improvement from the studious ignoring she did on the first visit.

A week after this visit I had the following feedback from her owner that made me smile:

*"I have been concentrating on the **python lifts** and more just running my hands down her legs relatively quickly and lightly as you suggested which she doesn't mind. The hind legs are not icy cold and both feel a similar temperature. Her forelegs are really quite warm and consistently so. The other body parts which felt cold are no longer. I feel really positive vibes coming from her at the moment and for the first time for ages I feel more optimistic about her chances of recovering."*

### **04/09 Visit 3 – Herbie now moved to TLS for the next stage of her rehabilitation**

My first check was for the temperature in her feet – this was the first time that I felt all four of them were warm (Whoop! Whoop!). Now that my principal concern about Herbie – her freezing limbs – had gone, my aims for her bodywork changed. Herbie's new accommodation provides the facility to gradually increase her turnout area on a flat surface, which wouldn't have been possible at her home, this meant that as she showed more inclination to move, her area could be increased to accommodate that. My job, as I saw it, was to show her the possibilities of movement and then increase those possibilities by reducing the amount of tension in her body and promoting her balance and body awareness.

During this session I was finally able to pick up one of her front feet briefly and attempt **Leg circles**, an excellent exercise for increasing the range of motion available in the limbs. The circle that Herbie was able to do with her left front leg showed that her shoulder was very tight and restricted, the "circle" was very small and more like a "wonky rectangle" and she didn't hold her leg up for long, I didn't even attempt the other legs.

At the end of this session I was really pleased to be thinking that groundwork exercises and movement were needed for the next stage of her rehabilitation.

### **19/09 Visit 4 – Groundwork!**

Herbie was in her turnout area when I arrived, this was so nice to see this contrast to when I first saw her. However, mustn't get excited too soon, groundwork and movement were to bring their own challenges...

From the moment Herbie saw the head collar she had a quick negative reaction; she turned her head away and was biting at the rope, using her head to push away. With the head collar on she set off walking really fast with her head down. TLS had reported that they were doing 20-30 minute walking sessions in hand and Herbie was progressing well, so my plan was to try out a few groundwork

exercises and see what kind of moving posture Herbie had and how she was to handle, for example: did she stop and start easily, could she turn equally to the left and the right.





I watched her walk round on a loose rein with Andrea leading to start with. She walked quickly with her head low to the ground, this puts lots of weight on her front legs (on the forehead), and makes stopping pretty difficult. She looks disconnected and her hind end is trailing behind. Leading her is not an easy business since she seems to easily be bored or distracted and doesn't seem to understand the need to concentrate on what to do with her body. She appears well practised at leaning against the handler. It was obvious quite quickly that stopping was a problem, she adopted a head down barging posture, frequently trying to snatch at grass. While it would be possible to "make" Herbie stop, in the same way that someone experienced could "make" a horse pick up his leg, we are more interested in making it "easy" for her to do what we ask by encouraging better balance and a better posture.

We put a **Figure-8 body wrap** to start with to help her be aware of her body (at this stage I thought her body awareness was almost completely confined to her head), which I changed to a **Bridge body wrap** to connect her middle part too.



At the beginning of the session I found myself hurrying and holding my breath, when I noticed this I took a deep breath and realized that I wasn't the only one not breathing. Herbie also frequently was either **holding her breath or shallow breathing**, once we were aware of this, it became a tool we could use to help Herbie regain a bit of self-control or calm if things got tense, taking a moment to do some deep breaths often meant it was possible to then carry on with the exercise. (After the groundwork I did some **Belly lifts** to help her release her rib cage and take deeper breaths.)

I recruited Andrea to join me in leading Herbie, but **from the other side** of her, this leading position with two handlers is called **Homing Pigeon** and can help a horse to walk in its own balance instead of leaning on the handler. At this time, our version of this exercise didn't much resemble the textbook version because every time we slid away to give her space – she put her head right down to eat, so while it gave her a different experience, there was lots of room for improvement. The plan for the next session was to repeat the exercise in the sand school where we didn't have this problem. I'd like to be able to *encourage her to walk with her head higher* rather than *stopping her from putting her head down*, a subtle but important difference, but complicated to achieve with the option for grass as a distraction for her.

The eating for me is in some part displacement behaviour, it's important to consider whether "disobedience" and "bad behaviour" may well be the animal's way of handling the situation when they don't have any other tools to do so. This stage of Herbie's rehabilitation was highlighting her lack of life skills and we could empathize with her, imagine if you had spent the majority of your adult life diagnosed with an illness, on a restricted diet with sugar cravings, managing pain from your feet and pain from the muscles which you were using to compensate for this. Maybe you would have developed some avoidance techniques of your own. Would you have been a bit grumpy sometimes? Would you be sneaking food? Would you have been used to someone asking you to do things, or would someone have always done them for you? Would you be patient? - So if you see "bad" behaviour, ask yourself, "what could I do to help them be more successful?" and it might be that making the exercise easier or removing temptation – in this case the grass – would make the difference.



After the short groundwork session I did a bodywork session with her loose in her shelter and at the end she came and stood by me in a friendly relaxed way, it was really rewarding to see this little bit of communication from her.

### **01/10 Visit 5 – TTouch demo day**

Today was a brilliant day, Herbie looked great, moved great, she was easy to stop, she felt soft and I could do **leg circles** with her! We turned the session into an impromptu TTouch demo with one or two interested parties coming along to watch.

We did more groundwork, this time in the sandschool. We used **Homing Pigeon** almost straight away with her owner on the other side this time. Herbie started out a bit strung out and fast, after doing some **S'ing** and stops, she started to slow down — one of the onlookers said that at this point she started to look more connected, really stepping under with her hind legs.

I did a little bodywork with Herbie after the groundwork to demonstrate this week's homework exercise the **Octopus TTouch**. We did this later with people and everyone said "ooh that's lovely" - just to give you an idea of how it feels....

My bodywork sessions were getting shorter as Herbie was getting softer in her body and found processing the experience easier, another sign of progress.

### **15/10 Visit 6 Chestline driving**

Long reining is a good way of exercising a horse from the ground, encouraging working from the hind end and enabling turning in both directions. This was likely to be the principal way of exercising Herbie, so today I wanted to run through the steps for **Chestline driving**. This is a TTEAM exercise to prepare for **ground driving** (long reining); it is useful for many things including: teaching a horse to stop with its body in balance without leaning into the head collar or bridle; shifting the horse's attention – and therefore its bodyweight – backwards. This is exactly what Herbie could benefit from with her tendency to walk with her head down while being led.

In this exercise two lines are attached around the base of the neck and the signal to stop is given with a **signal and release** on the lines. Herbie found it difficult to stop to start with, but with a clear voice command and asking at the correct moment –i.e. when we judged that it was possible for her to stop – we saw the beginnings of understanding in Herbie’s attitude. One of the steps in this exercise is to give the **voice command** and walk up from behind with something yummy to feed, this exercise Herbie perfected in a short space of time...



Two weeks after this session with Herbie, her owner sent me this photo of a long reining session.

With Herbie in work and having turnout she was ready to go home. I have seen her on a two weekly basis for two and a half months and she has come so far, from being on long term box rest to being back in exercise and finding things to enjoy in life. Each time I came to visit her I could see that her owner and later TLS had been working hard to keep up with Herbie’s daily routine, they

took on board the information I could give them on **TTouches** and **Groundwork exercises** and were able to use them in their rehabilitation efforts, in conjunction with their existing knowledge, this dedication resulted in visible progress and enabled continual progression at each session.

TTouch in this case provided a compliment to Herbie’s care to help facilitate her rehabilitation, of course this would not have been possible without addressing the three things prescribed by TLS, identify the laminitis, find and remove/treat the cause of the laminitis, support and realign the feet.

*TTEAM and TTouch are not substitutes for professional veterinary care. If you suspect your horse has laminitis or is ill, please consult your vet.*

To contact me if you live in France and would be interested in a one-on-one session with your horse or to participate in a workshop, please visit my facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/DanielleDibbensTTouch>

For more information on TTEAM and TTOUCH and to locate a practitioner near you:

UK <http://www.ttouchteam.co.uk/TTouchHorses.shtml>

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